

Exhibit No. 5
Date 1-13-11
Bill No. SB 13Testimony of
Jonathan McKinneyIn opposition to Senate Bill 13 and the revision of the registration fee to "opt in"
January 13, 2011

I would like to share my concerns with Senate Bill 13 and the proposed amendment to revise the fee for state parks on light vehicle registration to opt in, and the negative impacts of this change on connecting young Montanans with their natural and cultural heritage.

I currently serve as the President and CEO for the Montana Conservation Corps, a nonprofit organization that empowers youth and young adults through hands-on conservation service and education. Each year, over 200 young adults serve in our AmeriCorps program, and 150 Montana teens participate in our month-long Youth Service Expeditions during the summer. One of these young participants reflected last year:

People talk about that one experience in life that changes them forever. They tell the stories of their hardships and trials that made them the person they are today. My MCC experience would defiantly qualify as one of these life altering moments. At times I didn't know if I'd make it, but I persevered and I will never forget my experience.

It has been a privilege for the MCC to work in partnership with our State Parks and Historical Commission to invest these young people as stewards of our state's rich and diverse natural and cultural resources.

The relationship between conservation corps and state parks may be traced back as far as the 1930's when young men serving in President Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps developed the modern infrastructure for the Lewis and Clark Caverns. This park became Montana's first state park in 1942 and remains a popular attraction.

In the early 1990's, the spirit of service and conservation was rekindled under the vision of Governor Racicot with the creation in 1991 of the Montana Conservation Corps, a program to develop youth as leaders, good stewards of our lands, and engaged citizens who improve their communities and natural landscape. One of our first great projects involved replacing the CCC-built trail through the caverns, and since then, MCC and Lewis and Clark State Park have enjoyed a productive relationship including the construction of cabins in the campground, and the development of a 10-mile trail system popular with hikers and mountain-bikers.

The basis of this relationship between MCC and the State Parks has rested on the mutual benefits of improving the resources of our parks – from building recreational trails at the Spring Meadow Lake State Park and Lone Pine State Park, to developing a Frisbee golf course at Makoshika State Park, to restoring cultural resources at Travelers Rest State Park and Pictograph Caves State Park – while also investing a new generation of young Montanan's as owners and stewards of our State's great resources.

These projects also provide a mechanism for young Montanans to learn job skills and develop an indomitable work ethic, practice leadership and communication skills, learn about the natural and cultural history of Montana, and develop a lifelong commitment to service and volunteerism. For the youth and young adults who invest of their hearts, minds, and muscles in making these parks better places, their service to Montana becomes a point of pride that defines who they are.

A few years ago when visiting Lewis and Clark Caverns State Park, I was talking with a manager who shared the story of one of our youth corps participants from Helena who after his summer with MCC, came back to the park, full of pride, to show his parents what he had accomplished that summer. The trail was a lasting legacy to his hard work and the positive relationships he had developed. These are results from these opt-out funds.

Simply stated, the financial impact of this bill would jeopardize these experiences for young Montanans. Every summer, MCC and the State Parks collaborate on projects where young Montanans may serve in their state parks under the guidance of MCC crew leaders. The State Parks contribute toward the costs to field these crews. In addition, the Parks dedicate staff to line out the projects, teach skills to the youth, and provide education about resources.

These projects with youth provide a cost effective mechanism to improve state resources, connect youth with the outdoors and nature, and prepare a generation of good workers and responsible land stewards. With the loss of funding indicated by the fiscal note for this bill, I fear that it may be impossible for the State Parks to continue partnering with the Montana Conservation Corps to provide such opportunities for young Montanan's. They simply wouldn't have the funds or personnel necessary to support such partnerships.

I would also like to speak as a private Montana citizen who enjoys free access to our state parks. Last February, I gave my 10 year-old son a new mountain bike for his birthday. In the spring, when trails in Bozeman were still buried under snow or too muddy, one of the first rides we shared together on a beautiful weekend in April was at the Lewis and Clark Caverns on trails built by MCC youth.

Later in the summer when returning from a raft trip, we stopped at Traveler's Rest near Lolo to stretch our legs. A tour of the visitor center and visit with the mountain men encamped there was enough to refresh us to complete our journey home, much like it did for Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and the Corps of Discovery.

In both cases, state parks provided an opportunity for my children to connect with their Montana heritage. In both cases, free access to these parks was instrumental to my decision to visit.

The current opt-out option gives all Montanans a fair opportunity to support our state parks and visit them for free as a privilege of living in the Great State of Montana. I urge that you do not adopt this amendment and retain the current opt-out mechanism as a means to support our state parks, and promote the involvement of young Montanans with our State resources, such as the hard work of young Montana Conservation Corps members spending part of their summer improving our state parks.

Thank you for your consideration.